

# The Missing Puzzle Piece in Translation Pedagogy: Adaptive and Elastic Competence

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## *Abstract*

The study of effective and innovative translation pedagogy has been drawing increasing attention in recent years, but the training of adaptive and elastic competence is somewhat overlooked. This study investigates the importance of strategic translation through the theoretical lens of Verschueren's (1998) Adaptation Theory. The analysis is based on a case study of the 2001 Sino-American Hainan airplane collision crisis, and in particular the pivotal role of different versions of the American "two sorrys" letter in facilitating the resolution. It highlights the need to incorporate language adaptation and the interests of all parties in a translation. This study argues that translation is a negotiable and adaptable process, influenced by both overt and covert components, and that this process should be reflected in translation education by fostering the ability to get behind the text to cater to the interests of all interested parties: that is, to cultivate adaptive and elastic competence. The findings suggest that a realistic, balanced, and robust account of adaptation and elasticity is needed for effective translation education.

## **1. Introduction**

Tertiary translation and interpreting education focuses too much on academic and literary translation, and there are immediate needs for training in commercial translation (Schellekens 2004). There have been

important developments that suggest a more effective and innovative translation pedagogy is required, such as Vermeer's (1989) Skopostheorie, Gutt's (1991) relevance models, and Kiraly's (2000) social constructivist approach, among others. The importance of adaptive and elastic competence is to be addressed in translation education, which is the focus of this study.

In this study, the working definition of "adaptation" (Verschuereen 1998) of translation refers to the adjustment made in translation, and "elasticity" of translation (Glinert 2010; Zhang 2011) refers to a translation that can be "stretched or compressed," so to speak, to suit communicative needs. This study investigates the significance of elastic and adaptive translation.

The theoretical framework used here is Verschuereen's (1998) Adaptation Theory (AT), and the discussion is based on the translation negotiation of a U.S. letter issued during the 2001 Sino-American crisis concerning the Hainan airplane collision. AT stresses three properties of language and its use: variability, negotiability, and adaptability. The three are interwoven and interdependent. Variability considers *what* linguistic choices are available, negotiability reveals *how* the choices are made, and adaptability discusses *why* the decisions are arrived at. The adaptability factor has four aspects: contextual correlates, structural objects, dynamics, and salience. The key concept of AT is that language use is strategically adaptable; this study intends to investigate the applicability of AT to the teaching of translation.

## 2. Translator Training to the Real World and the Market

There seem to be more works focusing on translation itself than on the teaching of translation. However, translation education is just as important as, if not more than, translation study itself because professional and systematic training promotes the effectiveness of translation. Kiraly (2000) states that traditional translation teaching models tend to adopt a transmissionist approach, paying little attention to the needs of students, industries, and clients, a typical teacher-centered approach. He also, as does Warren (2005), argues that a transmissionist approach does not recognize language as context-bound because it treats translation teaching as a transfer of knowledge from teacher to student, treating language as a simple transparent medium transmitted from

person to person. Transmissionist frameworks assume that if students learn all the components of the syllabus, they should be able to translate texts during practical translation classes, which is far from the reality (Prieto and Linares 2010).

In recent years, the tertiary sector has increasingly become aware of the needs of the translation industry and redesigned their courses accordingly. Kiraly (2000) proposes a social constructivist approach to translation education, progressing from traditional transmissionist pedagogy. He promotes a student-centered/empowered approach and situates training within authentic actions. Kiraly suggests a professional needs analysis; his concept of translator competence validates authentic materials in process-oriented, reflection-driven, collaborative, problem-based learning. Prieto and Linares (2010) propose a pedagogical shift from a translation competence approach (teacher-centered) to a translator competence approach (student-centered). They state that while there are some positive aspects to the translation competence approach (such as in Neubert 2000; Schäffner and Adab 2000), in order to bridge the gap between professional needs and students' actual competence, translation educators should be encouraged to work with the translation industry and to consult national standards. Pellatt, Griffiths, and Wu's (2010) edited book is a collection of works on the teaching and testing of translation and interpreting. Among others, Chen's (2010) experiment reveals that small student-student group discussions, as opposed to teacher-student groups, are more conducive to enhancing students' reflective thinking and their ability to identify and solve problems, which in turn helps to improve translation quality.

Little research has been carried out in training students' adaptive and elastic competence in translation. Given that there are multiple and viable solutions to translation, the expectation of a single correct answer is unrealistic (Kiraly 2000); this study explores the strategic and pragmatic operations of providing translations that meet the stakeholders' communicative needs, where the focus is on how the translation can be flexible enough to incorporate the interests of all those involved.

## 3. Adaptation Theory, Translation, and Translation Teaching

To develop the study of pragmatics, Verschuereen (1998) proposed AT as a way to explore the use of language from an interdisciplinary (linguistic,

cognitive, social, and cultural) and cross-linguistic perspective. AT treats language as a system of communication, and language use as a communicative event. It provides a systematic explanation of pragmatics and the interpretability of human linguistic behavior in relation to relevant contextual, cognitive, social, and cultural variables.

AT considers language use as the continuous making of linguistic choices. These can be conscious or unconscious choices, for language-internal and/or language-external reasons. The choices may be phonetic, phonological, lexical, semantic, morphological, or syntactic. The three key notions of AT, variability, negotiability, and adaptability, are hierarchical and integrated. Variability is the basis, providing a range of possible choices of language form. These choices of language principles and strategies are negotiated in a highly flexible manner, rather than being stipulated automatically. In the process of negotiation, the adaptability principle guides the language user to make the choices that will achieve communicative goals effectively.

AT focuses on four interdependent aspects of language use, including context, structure, dynamics, and salience. Adaptability looks at contextual correlates, suitable structural layers, temporal adjustments, and the degree of awareness and motivation of linguistic choices. All these involve the language user, in terms of perception, representation, and interpretation processes. AT emphasizes that the dynamically generated pragmatic meaning is to be contextualized, negotiated, and interpreted by the participants in the process of interaction.

As with any theory, there are challenges with AT. Among others, Mey (1998) questions the precise definition of adaptability. However, it seems clear that AT is insightful in dealing with issues of language use, and particularly translation, in the case of this study. Although AT does not provide specific translation methods or pedagogical guidelines, its conceptual framework is useful to explain how humans and language interact and adapt to each other, and how a target text can adapt to the source text to produce effective translation appropriate to a specific context.

The theoretical framework of AT appears relevant in translation and translation education, as translators need to make choices, negotiate, and adapt to communicative needs. They not only choose forms but also make decisions on pragmatic strategies, in both producing and interpreting. Guided by AT principles, this section discusses the case

study of the 2001 Sino-American dispute in terms of the role translation played in averting a major crisis.

### 3.1 The Role of Translation in the 2001 Sino-American Incident

On April 1, 2001, a U.S. Navy plane was operating about 110 kilometers from China's Hainan Island when two Chinese fighters intercepted it. During the interception, there was a midair collision that caused the death of a Chinese pilot and the emergency landing of the U.S. plane on Hainan; twenty-four American crew members were detained.

Given the extreme strategic sensitivity of Hainan Island, China and the United States disputed the legality of U.S. naval aircraft overflying the area as well as the cause of the collision and the assignment of blame. To resolve the situation, a so-called "letter of the two sorries" was delivered by then U.S. ambassador Joseph Prueher to China's then foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan on April 11, 2001. The final version of the letter was agreed upon by both sides after several rounds of back-and-forth negotiations and after earlier drafts of "regret only" statements were rejected by the Chinese government. Here are two relevant excerpts from the accepted letter (underlining added by the author):

- (1) Both President Bush and Secretary of State Powell have expressed their sincere regret over your missing pilot and aircraft. Please convey to the Chinese people and to the family of pilot Wang Wei that we are very sorry for their loss.
- (2) Although the full picture of what transpired is still unclear, according to our information, our severely crippled aircraft made an emergency landing after following international emergency procedures. We are very sorry the entering of China's airspace and the landing did not have verbal clearance, but very pleased the crew landed safely. We appreciate China's efforts to see to the well-being of our crew. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/apr/11/china.usa2>, retrieved on June 27, 2012)

The Chinese asked for a formal and full apology that would satisfy its enraged citizens. However, the United States did not provide this; the Americans were perhaps concerned that a full apology would imply responsibility.<sup>1</sup> Under the circumstances, the "two sorries" letter was intentionally made vague in order to save the face of all parties involved.

The “two sorrys” letter was translated into Chinese in two different versions. The U.S. embassy in Beijing released their version, and then the Chinese released a second version. In the U.S. version, the first “very sorry” (in example 1, regarding the loss of the pilot’s life) is *feichang wanxi* (非常惋惜, “great sympathy”), and the second “very sorry” (in example 2, regarding the emergency landing without permission) is *feichang baoqian* (非常抱歉, “extremely sorry”). The Chinese version was *shenbiao qianyi* (深表歉意, “deep expression of apology or regret”) for both “very sorrys” in the letter. The above English translations are taken from Zhang (2001) and Yee (2004). According to Jiang and Hao, *qianyi* (歉意, “apology or regret”) is “lesser in degree than” *daoqian* (道歉, “apology”), “which the Chinese government had demanded, it also assumes a certain extent of responsibility on part of the person who expresses *qianyi*” (Jiang and Hao 2010, 260). However, *qianyi* (歉意, “apology or regret”) is stronger in degree than *wanxi* (惋惜, “sympathy”).

The U.S. translation of the apology gives a weak version of “very sorry”: it is not as formal as in the Chinese translation. However, the different versions serve the different needs of the two sides perfectly. The different Chinese terms used in the two translations strategically manipulate the elasticity of “very sorry” and satisfy each nation’s intentions. Along with other factors, the two versions of the translation defused a potentially dangerous Sino-American crisis. The twenty-four U.S. crew members were released shortly after the issue of the letter and its translations; the letter also led to the eventual return of the disassembled plane. To a certain extent, the vague apology, and more importantly the elastic translations, helped to resolve a crisis. This highlights the importance of elasticity in translation and translation education, the focus of this study.

The way the United States went about apologizing and translating in this incident presents both similarities to and differences from another Sino-American crisis in 1999, when then president Bill Clinton issued a full apology after the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. The bombing killed three Chinese journalists and injured more than twenty others, outraging the Chinese public. As in the 2001 incident, the U.S. government initially published statements of regret. However, the Chinese government demanded a public apology, and U.S. officials then made repeated statements of regret and apology. For example, Clinton declared in a public speech,

- (3) I have already expressed our apology and our condolences .... But again, I want to say to the Chinese people and to the leaders of China, I apologize, I regret. But I think it is very important to draw a clear distinction between a tragic mistake and a deliberate act of ethnic cleansing. And the United States will continue to make that distinction. (cited in Tian 2007, 369)

Here, “I apologize” seems less vague and more categorical than “very sorry” in the 2001 incident. However, the “but” immediately after the apology may act to shield the United States from blame for the incident. The “but” strategy was also used in 2001, as shown in examples (1) and (2) above. It appears that the U.S. government did not want to take responsibility by emphasizing that the incidents were accidental—simply an unintentional mistake in the case of the 1999 incident. What sets Clinton’s apology apart from the 2001 apology is that his was clear-cut. In addition, there was no translation provided. In the Hainan case, although the United States maintained that it had acted within its rights, it eventually issued what China accepted as an apology. In the end, both China and the United States claimed “victory” for their sides, and the contradictory claims of victory were partly due to the different interpretations and translations of the letter (Jiang and Hao 2010, 261). Similarly, as a political science professor and member of the National Security Council under former U.S. president Bill Clinton, Kenneth Lieberthal, commented, “[I]t used ambiguous terminology so that the Chinese text reads as something closer to an apology than the English text does—using legitimate translation but just in different connotations of words” (cited in Cheng 2002, 315).

Glinert (2010) examines the pragmatics of apology negotiations in the 1999 and 2001 Sino-American crises. Although his focus is not on translation, his argument is relevant to this study. He shows that to cater to audiences of different cultures and achieve each side’s political goals, the players on both sides employed strategic tactics, semantic ambiguities, and multiple written translations of the “apologies” in the extended negotiations. During the dialectical struggle over the pragmatic meaning of the wording used, and over what an apology actually is and does, verbal remedies and nonverbal strategies (such as silences, delays, and punishment of personnel) played vital roles. Glinert affirms the significance of elasticity, negotiation, and discursive struggle in the diplomatic apology, and possibly in apologies in general. His analysis of

elasticity in apologizing is applicable to translation as well.

### 3.2 Adaptation Theory and Translation

As mentioned before, AT (Verschuere 1998) affirms three properties of language use: variability, negotiability, and adaptability. This section concentrates on the application of these three properties to translation through an analysis of the “two sorries” letter.

#### 3.2.1 Variability and Negotiability

Illustrating the variability of language use, the translations of the U.S. apology letter in the 2001 incident vary in a number of aspects. An apology may be person to person or state to state. In this case, one state is apologizing to another state. The apology itself may be ranked anywhere from a ritualized response to a genuine expression of remorse. Apologizing is a complex process involving linguistic, cultural, and sociopolitical factors. Depending on the specific situation, the stratified levels of apologizing tend to link to the apologizer’s responsibility and possible financial liability, as well as to face and power.

Regarding the 2001 incident, then U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell denied that “very sorry” meant the United States took the blame for the happening. On CBS’s *Face the Nation* on April 8, 2001, he said, “We do acknowledge that we violated their air space ... but that can’t be seen as an apology accepting responsibility.” He also said, “To apologize would have suggested that we had done something wrong and were accepting responsibility for having done something wrong, and we did not do anything wrong, and therefore it was not possible to apologize.” He insisted that the United States was expressing “regret” and “sorrow” and was “very sorry” for the loss of the young Chinese pilot’s life and that the U.S. Navy plane entered China’s airspace without permission because the plane had been severely damaged and therefore formalities were not available to the pilot at that moment (*Kyodo News International*, April 12, 2001). The United States seemed to take the view that apologizing would be tantamount to admitting guilt and accepting responsibility, possibly including legal liability for subsequent claims for damages.

However, the Chinese government wanted an apology. Given Chinese cultural norms, the demand for an apology was likely to serve a

need to save face. Under the circumstances, the U.S. letter and especially its translation had to strike the proper chord with both the leadership and the public. It must have been a delicate negotiation process. The sides eventually settled on wording that sounded acceptable to each (<http://news.0898.net/2010/09/12/584509.html>). It was in the interest of both sides to minimize the crisis; and it appears that when the Chinese realized that the United States would not say “we apologize,” they accepted “very sorry” as the best offer. Through its choice of words in the translation of the apology, China apparently believed, or wanted to believe, the “two sorries” constituted Washington’s apology for the incident, and this enabled their decision to release the American aircrew and aircraft.

The most intriguing part of the extended negotiation process was the translation of the “two sorries.” The discrepancy is manifest in the translated versions: for the same English term “very sorry,” the United States used two Chinese terms with a weak sense of apology (“great sympathy” and “extremely sorry”), while the Chinese used a stronger term (“deep expression of apology or regret”). Glinert’s (2010) American interviewees were ambivalent about whether “very sorry” was intended as an apology. Initially, the American negotiators in 2001 felt there was no room for maneuver between “sorry” and “apologize.” Officer C, who was interviewed by Glinert, saw the phrase “very sorry” as involving no admission of responsibility; “very sorry” belonged to the weakest level of apology (Glinert 2010, 63). Yee (2004, 53) points out that due to the strong domestic constraints, China and the United States reached “a compromise in large part by jointly lowering their initial demands in ways that deflected the criticisms of their respective domestic hard-liners. The semantic ambiguity and linguistic flexibility of their different languages and translations facilitated the success of these unofficial joint deflections.”

According to the theoretical framework of AT, translation may be viewed as a negotiated process. The variability of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural diversity can be negotiated to the translator’s advantage to achieve an effective translation, as demonstrated in this case study. Due to the incompatibility of the mutual needs to save face for both China and the United States, negotiations were carried out to find a middle ground in both language use and translation. Ultimately, the strategic use of apologizing terms and, more crucially, the pragmatic manner of negotiating the two versions of the translation skillfully bridged the gap

of cross-linguistic differences, the desires of diverse audiences, and the needs to save face of all parties involved.

### 3.2.2 Adaptability and Elasticity

AT is about adaptability in language use. Verschueren (1998, 75) states, “[C]ontextual correlates of adaptability potentially include all the ingredients of the communicative event with which linguistic choices have to be inter-adaptable.” Contextual correlates include language users, their mental world (e.g., emotions, beliefs, desires or wishes, motivations, and intentions of language users), and their social world (e.g., social settings, institutions, and culture). In the case of the 2001 incident, the apology and its translations were influenced particularly by the clash of mental and social worlds. The United States needed to get its aircrew and aircraft back without issuing a formal and complete apology. The Chinese wanted a formal and full apology in which the United States admitted guilt. The two sides had quite different mental, sociocultural, and political worldviews, which made the contextual correlates multifaceted and complex—and made the mission extremely difficult to accomplish.

To start with, there was an apology controversy. As mentioned previously, the United States did not consider the letter an apology *per se* but rather an expression of regret and sorrow. It was, however, interpreted as an apology by the Chinese, both in their translation and in the eyes of some state-run media outlets (Zhang 2001). A senior American administration official noted, “What the Chinese will choose to characterize as an apology, we would probably choose to characterize as an expression of regret or sorrow” (*Taipei Times*, April 12, 2001).

The key concept of AT is that language use must adapt to communicative needs. Similarly, translation should be adapted to meet the communicative needs of stakeholders. It needs to be adaptive to different linguistic and cultural norms. In the circumstances of the 2001 incident, adaptation was a way to solve the problem of having face mutually satisfied. “The US and China understand one another,” American interviewee B commented (cited in Glinert 2010, 59). U.S. diplomats were caught between a range of domestic political pressures, B pointed out, and these pressures constrained the apology options (Glinert 2010, 59).

Another aspect of adaptability in this case study is whether or not a translation was to be given and, if so, by whom, and of what type the translation was to be. In the 1999 incident, the United States did not provide a translation. Glinert (2010, 61) comments, “The reasoning for giving the Chinese an interpretive free rein is interesting: First, the English form of the apology was President Clinton’s own words, and thus highly authoritative; the American audience would know for sure what America had and had not said. Second, the Chinese interpretation of the apology, with its subtle choice of apology terms, would provide feedback as to what the Chinese government was thinking.” In other words, translation is a way of knowing your opponent’s next move.

There was an American translation released during the 2001 crisis because “the US did not want to leave it to the Chinese to interpret its statement as they wished—presumably because the US saw it as a matter of precedent and legal liability to reserve the right to fly in that region” (Glinert 2010, 65). Glinert disputes what Zhang (2001) claims, that by releasing its own translation the United States was able to “leave no room for further dispute.” Glinert argues, first, that many Chinese could read the original English letter and see for themselves that the Americans were not saying “we apologize” and, second, that the discrepancies between the two translations demonstrate there is always room for further dispute about the meaning of an apology (Glinert 2010, 66).

Interestingly, neither China nor the United States seems to mind the discrepancies between the two versions. It may be that the needs of all relevant stakeholders on both sides, including leaders, politicians, media, and the public, had to be met. The translation discrepancy was not going to be corrected by either side as long as it would stop further escalation of the situation, end the demonstrations, and gain the release of the American aircrew. As Yee (2004, 82) states, “Chinese and American leaders were aided by the ambiguities of semantics and translations. In the end, American and Chinese leaders claimed the other side met their demands and enough of their citizens concurred to enable them to deflect the ire of disgruntled hard-liners. The importance of semantics and translations in facilitating the resolution of the Hainan incident suggests that devoting greater attention to the effects of language can enhance two-level analysis, especially in cases where the two sides have significantly different languages.” Yee’s viewpoints are confirmed in Tian and Chao (2008).

Zhang (2001) explains the difference in translation from the perspective of ideology. Zhang studies the dynamic relationship among language, culture, and ideology, based on the 2001 incident. Zhang states, "The differences in cross-cultural apologetic behaviour, magnified by opposing ideologies, prompted China's demand of a formal apology from the US and the US refusal to such a demand" (Zhang 2001, 383). Zhang claims that the Chinese have "a more complex system of apologizing vocabulary and a greater emphasis on assuming responsibility" (Zhang 2001, 383). That may provide both a linguistic and a cultural basis for their version of the translation.

Negotiating, adapting, and stretching words and their translation to hit the right button can be the key to resolving a crisis like the 2001 incident. The result of the intensive negotiations shows that it is useful to "stretch the words," as Glinert (2010, 62) puts it. One of Glinert's interviewees mentioned that the goal of U.S. negotiators was to hit the right button with China, while not hitting the wrong button back home. "Occasionally, we're lucky and find language that we regard as innocent while the Chinese deem it satisfactory and abject" (Glinert 2010, 62).

### 3.3 Adaptation Theory in Translation Education

The analysis above demonstrates the validity of the adaptability of AT (Verschuereen 1998) in translation. The fact that, in the 2001 incident, adaptive and elastic translation saved the day for all parties raises an intriguing challenge to conventional translation theory and practice, and particularly to translation education. There seems to be a need for the curriculum to be made more realistic and relevant to what is happening in reality and for translation education to be less idealized and more useful for students.

The findings of the 2001 incident discussion suggest that the interests of stakeholders are an important element in translation education. This is in line with the claim of Vermeiren's (2010) sociological approach. In Vermeiren's study of the evaluation of interpreter performances, the focus was on the stakeholders of the interpreting examination board and the criteria governing all parties throughout the exams. The jury, the faculty board, and the special board formed the institutional stratified body for appeals; Vermeiren investigated their interactions in reaching decisions. Kiraly's (2000) social constructivist approach also promotes a professional needs

analysis in translation education.

Translation is not a simple linguistic-cultural consideration; it is much more than that. It can be a manifestation of a power struggle among many stakeholders, just as in the 2001 incident different translations were negotiated for the needs of face, power struggle, and other considerations. Hwang (1987, 962) states, "Doing face is an important way of showing off one's power." To reflect the elastic nature of the American diplomatic apologies, the translation had to be elastic as well. The two versions were successful in that they helped to resolve the conflict with strategically stretched "sorries." This is no textbook template of the translation of "very sorry," but it may be significant that the teaching of translation stresses the pragmatic approach as a principle, while actual translation skills can be specified and finalized to suit a specific context.

Different stakeholders relating to a translation have different needs and interests, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in conflict; translation may have to serve the different requirements of each side. This is applicable in situations both simple and complex, from the translation of a personal note to that of a governmental letter between world superpowers. When discussing the evaluation of an interpreter's performance, Vermeiren (2010, 288) states that when there is a mixed jury representing different stakeholders, the sociological dimension is vital. In the case of the 2001 incident, the primary stakeholders, the United States and China, needed to consider issues of national sovereignty, national security, face, power, values, prestige, integrity, and so forth. Other important parties, the public of the two nations, could scrutinize their government's performances from the perspectives of their personal and diverse interests and desires. There is a dynamic in interaction among all the stakeholders: their interests may converge or diverge, depending on changes of time and situation. Translators may have to be trained to negotiate skillfully and balance the interests of all parties. They may have to consider several different interests in producing an effective and satisfactory translation.

The teaching of translation may also draw students' attention to the "unspeakable" context behind the text. For example, the United States used *feichang wanxi* (非常惋惜, "great sympathy") to translate the first "very sorry" regarding the death of the pilot but changed to *feichang baoqian* (非常抱歉, "extremely sorry") for the translation of the second "very sorry" regarding the unauthorized emergency landing. It is interesting to see

that the Americans chose a nonapologetic term for the first case and a term with a slightly more “apologetic” element for the second. Why did they differentiate the two “very sorrys”? On the other hand, the Chinese used the same wording, *shenbiao qianyi* (深表歉意, “deep expression of apology or regret”), for both “very sorrys.” This could be because a “face-saving formula of ‘creative diplomacy’ was being worked out making tactical use of ambiguous terminology” (Cheng 2002, 315–16). Cheng also states that there were many things unsaid in the news about the incident through the use of implicatures (i.e., conditional makers of if-clauses) (Cheng 2002, 309). There are a number of reasons for each side’s strategic translation, many of them related to this sort of behind-the-scenes context. All of these are important for translators as they consider how to get the “unsaid” but implied things incorporated into their translation, and this issue could be something to which translation education pays particular attention.

While elasticity has a vital function in translation, it should also have a limit. For example, “very sorry” may be stretched to the limit of *shenbiao qianyi* (深表歉意, “deep expression of apology or regret”), but anything further may be unacceptable. There is an even stronger word in Chinese, *zhengshi daoqian* (正式道歉, “to formally apologize”), which delivers a categorical apology. However, translating “very sorry” in the U.S. letter as *zhengshi daoqian* would be over the limit and inappropriate. Such nuances are not trivial; they are extremely important. In translation education, students need to be made aware of the importance of strategic translation, but also of boundaries.

The teaching of translation cannot ignore the imprecision and roughness of real-life language use; this means that translation curricula may fit the needs of the real world. Students need to be able to come up with the sort of elastic translation that helped to solve the 2001 crisis, where the translators successfully deployed and “twisted” words to meet their stakeholders’ needs, because both sides ultimately wanted the letter to be acceptable, to avoid escalation of the dispute. In that case, although elastic language and translation were manipulated and exploited, nobody complained because the goals of the dominant parties were served. Imagine if the translation provided had not been so fluid; the outcome might have been very different.

The strategic translation used in the 2001 incident is something that should be taken into account in our translation theory and practice.

Semantic-pragmatic vagueness in translation may be more effective than being clear-cut and explicit. Vague language (Channell 1994; Zhang 1998) refers to linguistic terms with no clear-cut meaning (semantic and pragmatic) boundaries. The “very sorry” in the case study of this research is a prime example. Is it an apology? The answer is unclear: the meaning of “very sorry” is not categorical. Vague language is increasingly becoming an important area of linguistic studies, but its exploration is still limited in translation studies. Cutting’s (2007) edited book explores the application of vague language in language teaching, which may also apply to translation education.

This study aims to bring the issue of a translator’s adaptive competence to the attention of researchers and educators, but it does not intend to detail the specific steps and measures that need to be taken for the training of such competence in translation education: that may be the topic of another research project. Such training is principally expected to follow a social constructivist approach (Kiraly 2000), including features of authentic materials, process-oriented, scaffolded learning, and multiple and viable solutions to translation problems.

#### 4. Conclusions and Implications

Based on the findings of the 2001 Sino-American incident, this study shows that creative translation games were played by China and the United States to control a political and diplomatic war. While any number of elements of the incident itself might have been accidental, the manipulation of translation in resolving the confrontation was intentional and purposeful. This study demonstrates that AT is applicable in translation and translation pedagogy, and in particular that the translation process and outcome are negotiable and adaptable. The evidence also validates the arguments that (1) there is often no categorical solution to “real-world” translations and (2) elastic translation is a way of life in today’s world. All of these need to be reflected, incorporated, or strengthened as components of translation education curricula. The teaching of translation needs to incorporate real-life discursive struggles and practical translations. An effective or ineffective translation depends not only upon the accuracy of words but also upon whether or not the stakeholders’ objectives are served. Translation is a negotiated and sometimes conflicted or strategically fluid process, which is as important



as its product—an area that seems to be somewhat overlooked in current teaching. Both the understanding of strategic language and the capacity to use it are important in translation education.

The aim of this research is to call for a realistic, balanced, and robust account of effective translation education. Any idealized translation teaching lacks practicality and so may need to add an important dimension: training in adaptive and elastic translation competence. Strategic language manipulation and the interests of stakeholders play vital roles in the success of a translation. This study argues that the teaching of translation needs to address the complexity of translation as a negotiable and adaptable process, influenced by both overt and covert components. Any successful translation may have to have the ability to get behind the text, meet the needs of stakeholders, and satisfy all parties where possible; and it can do so by employing flexible strategies, that is, to demonstrating adaptive and elastic competence.

While this study argues that the translator's adaptive and elastic competence and the two different translations of "very sorry" saved the day in the 2001 Sino-American incident, political and diplomatic considerations and the intervention of the different governments and their representatives also played significant roles in deciding which version of translation was to be adopted. The final negotiated outcomes were far more complex than just the simple matter of a translator's competence. However, this study takes the view that ultimately it is the translator's skillful manipulation of words, and adaptive and elastic competence, which can help realize political and diplomatic goals. This suggests a direction for future research: the role of political intervention and considerations in translation.

An implication of this study is the need to reconsider the composition of an effective curriculum for translation pedagogy, especially with the adoption of a fresh view of the translator's adaptive and elastic competence. This study advocates a shift from a nonadaptive to an adaptive perspective, which is theoretically significant. Translation education will be more effective when it embraces the concept of elasticity. The study's adaptive-pragmatic approach to strategic translation may be particularly useful in professional translation training by promoting well-rounded translation knowledge and skills. The translation of vague language, such as "very sorry," deserves more

attention, so that translators will understand the important role vague language plays in communication. Vague language is an integral part of language: therefore, it should be an important area of translation research and teaching.

Although the case study here is a state-to-state situation, the findings are applicable to translations in other contexts and to other discourses. Adaptation and elasticity may be considered as important tactics and tools for translators in various situations. It should be noted, though, that adaptive and elastic translation should have limits. Where is the boundary between legitimate elasticity and unacceptable distortion of the source text? This is a topic for a future study.

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### Note

1. While there is disagreement on whether the U.S. letter is an apology, for the convenience of discussion the term "apology" is used from time to time in this study.

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